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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effects of early field experience on the attitudes of elementary preservice teachers toward teaching. The 32 participants, education majors enrolled in an interdisciplinary movement and the arts class, were assigned to early field experience in elementary school classrooms in Jackson, Mississippi public schools 2 mornings a week for 12 weeks. Pretest and posttest data were collected by means of an instrument employing a semantic differential scale measuring attitudes toward teaching. Results offer support for the inference that these preservice elementary teachers had positive attitudes toward teaching prior to early field experience and had even more positive attitudes toward teaching after their early field experiences. (Contains 13 references and 2 tables of data.) (RS)

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# THE INFLUENCE OF EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCES ON THE ATTITUDES OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS

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The Influence of Early Field Experiences on the Attitudes of Preservice Teachers


## Abstract

This study was designed to ascertain the effects of early field experience on the attitudes of elementary preservice teachers toward teaching. The 32 participants, enrolled in an interdisciplinary movement and the arts class, were assigned to early field experiences in elementary school classrooms two mornings a week for 12 weeks.

Pretest and posttest data were collected by means of an instrument employing a semantic differential scale measuring attitudes toward teaching. Statistical analysis was performed using a nonindependent samples repeated measures *t*-test. When pre and posttest total mean scores were compared, the difference was significant at .0042, $t(31) = -2.811$. These data offer support for the inference that these preservice elementary teachers had positive attitudes toward teaching prior to early field experiences and had even more positive attitudes toward teaching after their early field experiences.

## The Influence of Early Field Experiences on the Attitudes of Preservice Teachers

### Introduction

Too often student teaching is the first opportunity that prospective teachers have for clinical experiences in elementary schools. Prospective teachers sometimes advance to the last semester of their program before they have an opportunity to interact with students in the classroom and to discover if teaching is a career that they wish to pursue. It seems apparent that preservice teacher education would be improved if candidates were required to observe and to actively participate in classroom experiences early in their program.

There are few research studies available on the effect of early field experiences on preservice teachers; thus, there is a need for research in this area. Lanier and Little (1986) noted that the knowledge base involving field experiences is limited and inconclusive. Specifically, studies which analyze the perceptions of preservice students about themselves and the teaching process, would provide critical data needed to improve teaching of undergraduates. Research in this area is needed to determine what changes, if any, occur as a result of preservice field-based experiences.

### Related Literature

Kagan (1992) reviewed several empirical studies treating behavior, beliefs, or images of preservice teachers

early in their professional experience. She observed that these studies have a pervasive theme, namely, the preservice teacher's notion of self as a teacher.

Although the contexts of these studies differed, findings were relatively cohesive. Each study documented the central role played by preexisting beliefs/images and prior experience in filtering the content of education course work. Each study also testified to the stability and inflexibility of prior beliefs and images.... (p. 141)

Students' personal beliefs and impressions determine the extent to which candidates benefit from preservice experiences and how prior knowledge and attitudes influence conceptual change. In fact, "personal beliefs and images that preservice candidates bring to programs of teacher education usually remain inflexible. Candidates tend to use information provided in coursework to confirm rather than to confront or correct their preexisting beliefs" (Kagan, 1992, p. 154).

In contrast, Florio-Ruane and Lensmire (1990) in a study of six elementary teachers enrolled in a writing course found conceptual change. This change might be attributed to the practicum's relationship to their research assignments and the requirement that the teachers interact with and study pupils.

Heath (1994) examined the outcomes of early student field experiences from the student's perspective. Students

responses with regard to skills they developed were analyzed in terms of: (a)professional skills associated with classroom instruction, (b) content skills related to teaching in the content areas, (c) context skills related to specific sites, and (d) self skills relating to personal development. The findings highlight the importance of field experiences as a means for knowledge procurement.

In examining a preservice teacher education program in Illinois to determine its effectiveness, Bercik (1992) analyzed data resulting from questionnaires. Findings suggested that the early field experience components should "begin with issues and strategies that are known to provide difficulty for the new teacher (p. 16). She recommended the inclusion of a mentoring component early in field experiences.

"Productive reform in teacher education must comprise the development of a rigorous practical pedagogy," noted Stones (1994, p. 316). He has criticized teacher education for separating theoretical aspects of courses from the practical, suggesting that what is needed is the integration of theory and practice.

Endeavoring to determine the effects of early field experiences on the attitudes of preservice teachers about teaching and the teaching environment in the elementary school, Anderson (1987) employed a semantic differential scale to measure attitudes. Though findings revealed a

slight decline in preservice teachers' interest in pursuing a teaching career, she concluded that other attitudes measured were positive. Furthermore, students' awareness of the school environment neither positively nor negatively affected their attitudes toward teaching and the teaching environment. She concluded that "additional research needs to be conducted to determine whether early field experience programs are achieving the goal of providing a realistic base for teacher education students to make decisions about their futures as educators" (p. 9).

Powell and Weaver (1993) implemented innovative field-based programs in two teacher education programs to provide evidence that field-based models are more effective than on-campus programs. An attempt was made to show how field-based programs differed from on-campus models. The findings showed no significant differences in the perceptions of the two groups; they were more alike than different. Some data suggested that field-based teachers have more confidence in their ability to become effective teachers. Additionally, they found both groups to have an interest in human service, in working with children, and in the affective aspects of teaching rather than pedagogical considerations.

Attempting to describe the socially constructed and contextual nature of early field experiences in an urban elementary school, Richards and others (1994) used multiple data sources. Formal and informal observations, field

notes, dialogue journals, and reflective comments were employed. Results indicated that most preservice students: (a) experienced frustrations, (b) became preoccupied with management concerns, (c) did not construct knowledge about literacy learning until the end of the semester, (d) developed a sense of responsibility and concern for students' instructional and emotional needs, (e) came to appreciate the field experience, (f) became less prejudiced and (g) appeared more flexible.

In summary, since Lanier and Little (1986) concluded that the knowledge basis for early preservice field experiences was limited, much work has been done. However, it does appear that the research results considered here, while addressing a variety of issues from different perspectives with different methods, leave many unanswered questions. Replication and extension of many of these results is needed.

**Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of early field experiences on the attitudes toward teaching of preservice elementary education majors. Data collection and analysis were guided by the research question: What attitudinal changes occurred, if any, as a result of early preservice field-based experiences?

**Instrumentation**

The instrument used in this study was a type of rating scale that employs a semantic differential design. This device utilizes a continuous scale on which respondents place a mark to reflect the intensity of their endorsement of the attitudinal variable under consideration (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). Using the instrument shown in Table 1, the researchers measured the shifts in students' professional perceptions about teaching.

Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957) obtained test-retest reliability data for the semantic differential. They noted that the evaluative dimension of the semantic differential exhibited reasonable face validity as a measure of attitudes. In comparing their instrument with the Thurstone and Guttman scales, scales of known validity and reliability, there was a strong positive correlation. Osgood, Suci,and Tannenbaum concluded that the evaluative factor of the semantic differential is indeed an index of attitude (p. 194-195).

**Sample**

Preservice participants in this study were 32 junior and senior elementary education majors enrolled in EDCI 304 (Movement and the Arts) at Jackson State University during the spring semester of 1994. The early field experience component that was associated with this course, was comprised of two hours of field experiences per week for 12 weeks in the public schools in the Jackson, Mississippi.

**Procedures**

In the schools, preservice students were asked to observe, participate, and instruct elementary school students. Students' individual experiences and readiness to assume an instructional role were taken into consideration by the cooperating teacher both in assigning specific tasks and in evaluating their progress.

Prior to the initiation of their preservice teaching experience, students were asked to complete an inventory of their attitudes toward teaching. Students were asked to indicate their attitudes toward teaching by checking the position on a seven point continuum that reflected their views between two opposed adjectives. To avoid the influence of a response bias, the adjective pairs were randomly listed from positive to negative and from the negative to positive.

Table 1. Attitudes Toward Teaching: A Subset of Descriptors

| Scales | | Scales |
|---|---|---|
| pleasant | ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ | unpleasant |
| ugly | ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ | beautiful |
| good | ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ | bad |
| clean | ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ | dirty |
| awful | ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ | nice |
| successful | ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ | unsuccessful |
| worthless | ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ | valuable |
| important | ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ | unimportant |
| bright | ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ | dark |
| dishonest | ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ | honest |

Changes in students' attitudes toward teaching were assessed by analyzing their scores on the shortened semantic differential. To begin with, the bipolar adjective scales were listed in a consistent direction and the points between the negative and positive adjectives were numbered from one to seven. Scored in this manner, a higher score indicates a more positive attitude. A total score of 10 across all adjective pairs would reflect the most negative views of teaching and a score of seventy would reflect the most positive views.

**Results**

Prior to their field experience, the subjects had an

average total score of 65.031 assigned points on the attitude inventory and after their field experience the subjects had an average total score of 67.031. A dependent samples, repeated measures t-test revealed this difference to be highly significant at the .0042 level (1-tail), $t(31) = -2.811$.

Although attitudes revealed by nine of the ten adjective pairs were more positive subsequent to field experience (and equally positive on the tenth), the separate changes in only three of the ten adjective pairs were significant. Students rated teaching as significantly more pleasant $t(31) = -2.06$, $p = .02$, significantly more beautiful $t(31) = -2.03$, $p = .02$, and significantly more successful $t(31) = -1.97$, $p = .02$. Attitudes reflected in the adjectives good, clean, nice, valuable, important and bright were also more positive after field experiences, but did not achieve significance.

Table 2. Attitudes Toward Teaching: Pretest Mean Scores, Posttest Mean Scores, *t*-values, and *p*.

| Dimensions of Teaching | Pre-Mean | Post-Mean | t-value | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. successful/unsuccessful | 6.5 | 6.75 | -1.969 | .029* |
| 2. ugly/ beautiful | 6.062 | 6.5 | -2.034 | .0253* |
| 3. pleasant/ unpleasant | 6.312 | 6.625 | -2.058 | .0241* |
| 4. bright/dark | 6.688 | 6.812 | -.9410 | .177+ |
| 5. important/unimportant | 6.906 | 6.968 | -1.000 | .1626+ |
| 6. worthless/valuable | 6.688 | 6.844 | -1.094 | .1411+ |
| 7. clean/dirty | 6.25 | 6.5 | -1.277 | .1055+ |
| 8. good/bad | 6.594 | 6.781 | -1.293 | .1029+ |
| 9. awful/nice | 6.25 | 6.469 | -1.561 | .0643+ |
| 10. dishonest/honest | 6.781 | 6.781 | 0 | 0 |

*Note: Items marked with * indicate a significant difference. Aspects marked with + are more positive and item 10 shows no change.

**Discussion**

Nine of the ten adjective pairs measuring attitudes were more positive subsequent to field experience and the tenth was equally positive, while for "teaching," "beautiful," and "pleasant" there was a significant difference between pre and posttests. These data offer support for the inference that these preservice elementary students had positive attitudes toward teaching prior to early field experiences and had even more positive attitudes toward teaching after their field experiences. This conclusion supports the findings of Anderson (1987) and Florio-Ruane and Lensmire (1990).

Increased awareness of the demands of the work setting,

did not diminish student's enthusiasm for teaching, but rather served to augment or increase positive views of teaching. This inference is in agreement with the results of the Richards et al. (1993).

Eight students out of 40 were unable to complete the semantic differential at the end of their field experience. The potential impact of the missing data or even the direction of the attitude changes of a group that may have decided against teaching as a career is impossible to anticipate at this point. Investigation of their experiences and attitudes pre and post field experiences might answer important questions.

In conclusion, although there are few research studies available on the effect of early field experiences on preservice teachers, it appears that early field experiences have benefits. Prior work reviewed here suggests that students acquire information and skills and experience attitude change. This study reveals that positive attitudes increase as a result of early field experiences. Additional studies which analyze the perceptions of preservice students about themselves and the teaching process, would provide critical data needed to improve teaching of undergraduates.

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